

Destination:

Marceline to Boonville

Each issue, the *Pathways* staff chooses a notable destination and explores the paths that lead to it, spotlighting attractions, points of interest and oddities along the way.

After all, getting there is half the adventure.

North Central Missouri is a land of superlatives, including the largest pecan, the smartest dog and the home of the creator of the world's most famous mouse.

The journey begins in Marceline, three miles south of Route 36 on Route 5 in Linn County. Route JJ leads to the business district of this tidy, typical Midwestern small town and turns into Main Street. Something seems vaguely familiar ... that's it! Main Street, Marceline is the model for Main Street, Disneyland. And that's because Walter Elias Disney lived here between 1906 and 1911, from age 5 through 10.

Disney wrote in 1938, "To tell the truth, more things of importance happened to me in Marceline than have happened to me



since, or are likely to in the future." It's safe to say more things of importance have happened to Marceline since its most famous son drew his first cartoon.

The Disney legacy is never far from view in Marceline. Disney himself attended the 1960 dedication of the Walt Disney Elementary School, where the desk on which he engraved his initials is enshrined behind glass and murals produced by Disney studios are mounted on the gymnasium walls.

Disney also attended the dedication of the Walt Disney Pool and Park Complex, to which he donated the Midget Autopia, the only ride ever moved outside Disneyland. One of the cars will be displayed at the new Santa Fe-Disney Museum.

Elk farmer Rush Johnson and his partners are the driving force behind the Main Street USA Charitable Foundation that's turning the old Santa Fe depot into the world's only Disney museum. Johnson plans to display thousands of artifacts donated by the Disney family when the museum opens this spring. MoDOT's enhancement funds program helped kick off the restoration of the historic depot. The program is the result of federal legislation requiring states to put



Rush Johnson and the Midget Autopia

By Pam Droog

at least 10 percent of federal money they receive into transportation enhancements like renovating rail depots, building bike/pedestrian trails and preserving historic neighborhoods.

"What we have here is one of the most recognized names in the world, and we had his blessing to use it," says Johnson, who hosted Disney and his wife during their visits to Marceline, and whose daughter lives in Disney's boyhood home.

Before you leave Marceline, take time for a stroll down Main Street. Murray's Department Store, opened in 1898, still sells overalls like the ones Mrs. Disney bought for little Walt. Stop by the Main Street USA



Kevin Wiggins at the soda fountain

foundation office to make a contribution and hear more Disney recollections. It's next door to Magnolia Antiques, owned by Rush Johnson's wife, Inez. And don't miss Wiggins Maytag Home Appliance Center and soda fountain where you can sip a shake among the stoves and dryers.



General Pershing Boyhood Home



Locust Creek Covered Bridge



"There used to be a soda fountain here. In fact, there was one on just about every block," says proprietor Kevin Wiggins, who built the counter himself and reinstalled the original stools. "The kids really enjoy it."

Head back up Route 5 and travel west on Route 36, the major east-west highway connecting St. Joseph and Hannibal. Four miles past Brookfield look for the sign for the new North Central Missouri Regional Airport, co-sponsored by Brookfield and Marceline. The Federal Aviation Trust Fund provided 90 percent of the \$5 million price tag; MoDOT and the local entities split the rest.

"This is the first time two cities in Missouri are building a new airport together," says David Burle, MoDOT's aviation programs manager.

Head five miles west on Route 36, turn right at the big white concrete steer, and take Route 5 north to Laclede, population 415. Follow the signs to the Gen. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing Boyhood Home State Historic Site. Gen. Pershing was the highest-ranking military officer in U.S. history, as commanding general of American Expedi-

tionary Forces during World War I and General of the Armies afterward. He lived in the white, two-story frame house from 1866 until 1882 when he left for West Point. The Department of Natural Resources acquired the property in 1952.

At the one-room Prairie Mound School interpretive center next door, Tourist Assistant Jana Keune says about 7,500 people visit the site annually.

"Not bad for being off the interstate," she notes. Since Sept. 11, she's noticed a real difference in people's reactions to the 30-minute interpretive film. "It stirs up more patriotism than it used to," Keune says.

Back on Route 36 west, just past Route 5 look for the marker for Locust Creek Covered Bridge State Historic Site. Clearly marked gravel roads lead to a parking lot at a dead end. Walk the quiet, quarter-mile

trail and there it is, a covered bridge over nothing, leading nowhere.

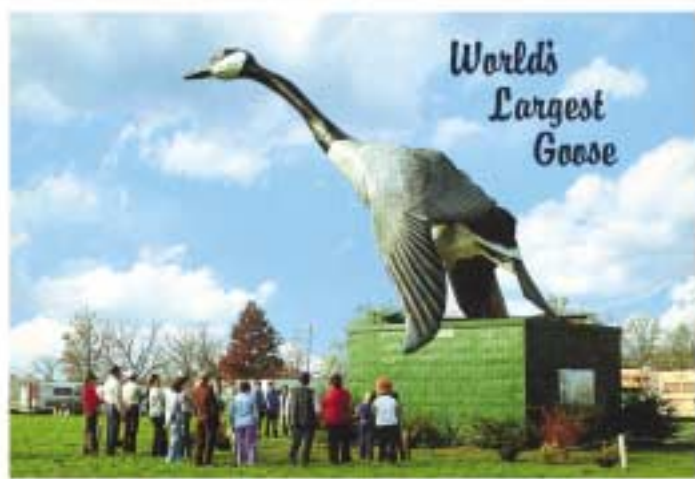
Built in 1868, the once-busy bridge crossed Locust Creek as part of the nation's first transcontinental road, Route 8. Over time, automobiles replaced horse-drawn wagons, and in 1930 U.S. Highway 36 replaced Route 8. Then the creek channel was changed in 1945, leaving the bridge to span a dry creek bed. Floodwaters deposited topsoil, and today the bridge rests on the ground, looking a little rough and carved with the initials of a lot of lovers.

At 151 feet, Locust Creek Bridge is the longest of Missouri's four surviving covered bridges. It was built of white pine using the Howe-truss system of wood diagonals and wrought-iron verticals. A nearby display tells the whole story of this lonely bridge, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Backtrack east two miles on Route 36 to Route 130 south and Pershing State Park. This pretty, 3,527-acre park features an impressive statue to Motherhood, donated by the Missouri Chapter of American War Mothers, as well as a 1.5-mile interpretive boardwalk through a wetland. It's considered an excellent example of a pre-European settlement landscape. Camping, swimming, fishing and hiking are available.

Take Route YY south across the Chariton County line to Route 139 and turn right to Sumner, population 200, the Wild Goose Capital of the World and home of Maxie, the world's largest goose. Maxie has hovered over Sumner Community Park like poultry on steroids since 1976. Named for the *Branta Canadensis Maxima*, Maxie stands 40 feet tall, weighs 5,500 pounds and has a 65-foot wingspan. He's lighted at night. Designed by a Kansas City sculptor and dedicated by former Gov. Christopher "Kit" Bond, he was christened by the Goose Festival Queen with a bottle of Grand River water.

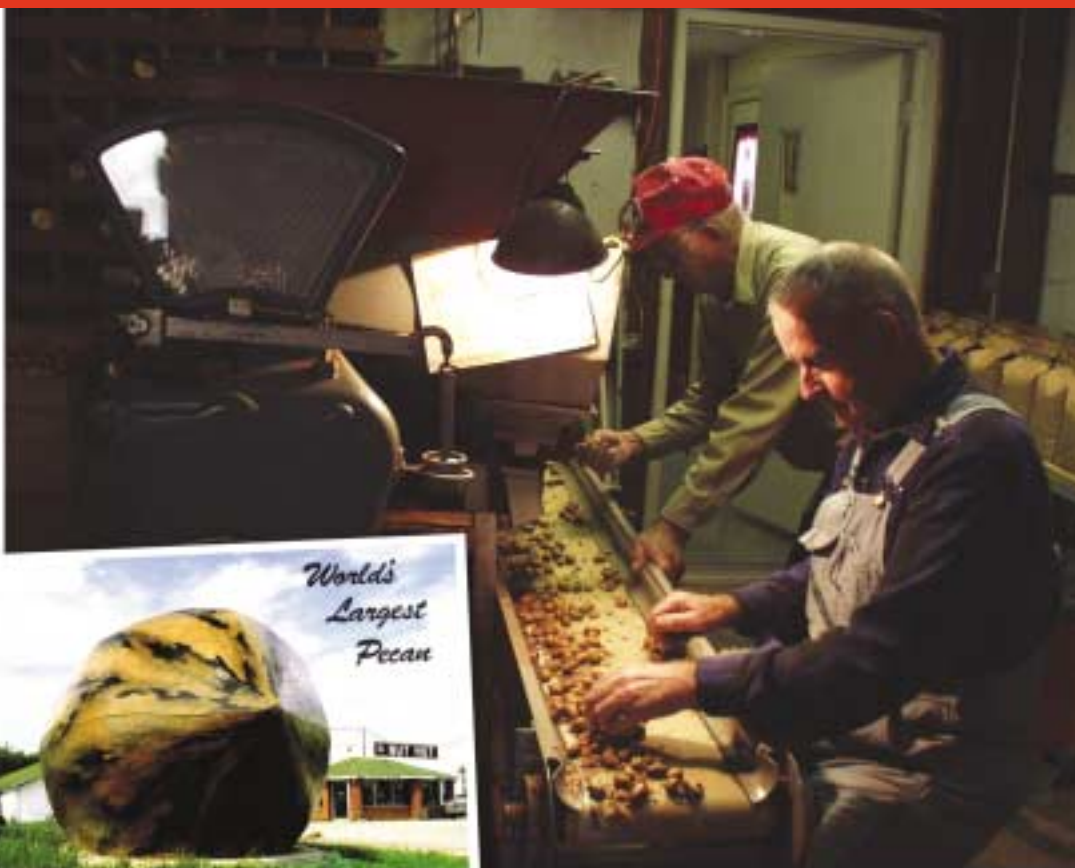
"In a 20-mile wind, Maxie turns slightly. You can look right at him and not see him move, but before long he is facing a different direction," says Annette Epperson, who was chairperson of Sumner's American Bicentennial goose project.



Head east on Route 139 to Route E east, then turn south on Route CC to Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge. This 10,795-acre bird-watcher's paradise is one of the main wintering areas for Maxie's cousins, the Eastern Prairie population of Canada geese, as well as other waterfowl and shorebirds.

Continue south on Route CC through fields and farmland. At Mendon, Route 11 heads toward Route 24. Welcome to pecan country; first stop – the store and processing plant of Niedholt Pecan Farms.

Friendly pecan farmer Melvin Niedholt harvests his nuts from 700 trees, some more than 175 years old.



Behind the scenes at Niedholt Farms

"Pecans are unpredictable," he says. "They produce every other year, but that don't hold true either. I've had trees bear four years straight."

Peek behind the door of the noisy nut-cracking room, where Wayne Hardwick sits for hours running the machinery. He's used to the constant racket, he says.

Travel east on Route 24 through Brunswick, the Pecan Capital of the World. It's a busy town of about 1,000, whose main street features cafés, antique shops and a dime store. The town holds an annual Pecan Festival the first weekend of October to celebrate the region's yearly million-pound pecan harvest.

Three miles east of town you know you're approaching something special – the James Pecan Farms. First you see the Burma Shave-like signs but they don't rhyme: Free Recipes. Good Conversations. Organic Pecans. Unusual Gift Shop. We Sell Pecan Trees. See the World's Largest Pecan Weight 12,000 pounds.



Then there it is, in front of the Nut Hut gift shop and pecan museum, at 7-foot-high by 12-feet long, the world's largest pecan, made of brown-painted concrete over a chicken-wire form. Artificial flowers and concrete gnomes adorn the grounds, and paintings of a sinister hammer with arms and legs chasing a gigantic and very unhappy pecan adorn the outbuildings.

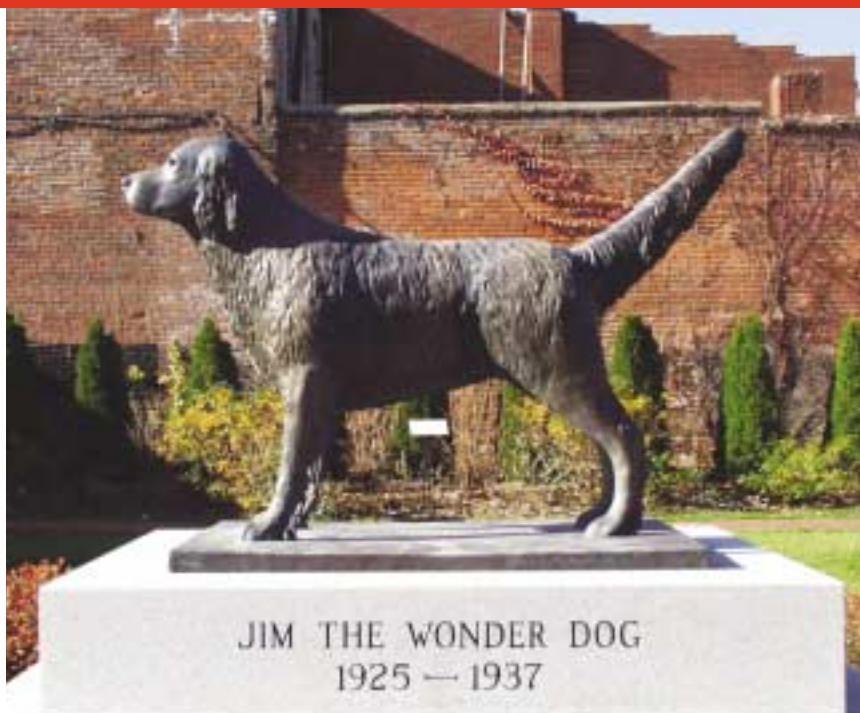
The strange little cartoon was the idea of Elizabeth James, age 83, who, with her late husband, George, farmed 10,000 pecan trees on 1,400 acres for more than 60 years.

"God put the trees here," she says. "Nobody paid much attention to them" until the family's survival depended on it. George James eventually patented three pecan tree varieties.

Inside the Pecan Museum in the back room, James shares stories and memories, referring to old newspaper articles and a photo of U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft cracking pecans (when he was Missouri's governor).

Six miles west of Brunswick on Route 24, turn left on Route 41 south, an easy two-lane that travels past pretty farms and panoramas, and rich Missouri River bottomland with huge fields. Cross the river at Miami over an elderly green iron bridge. Then head west on Route 122 to the small, scenic Van Meter State Park, an area where Missouri Indians lived from prehistory to the 1720s. Evidence of an earthworks fort and burial mounds are still visible.

Route 41 south winds through the low rolling hills characteristic of the region. It hooks up with Route 65 and leads to Marshall, home of 12,433 citizens and a memorial to Jim the Wonder Dog.



Jim the Wonder Dog, born in 1925, was the pet Llewellyn Setter of Sam Van Arsdale, who owned the former Ruff Hotel (now the site of the memorial). Until age 3, Jim was just an average dog. But then Van Arsdale noticed Jim actually seemed to understand what he was saying.

For example, Van Arsdale would tell Jim to pick out the lady in the red dress or pick out a car by its owner, make, license plate or color and Jim would do it without fail. He could distinguish a variety of tree,

the name of a business or the occupation of a stranger. Jim could even pick out the correct answers to questions in foreign languages, shorthand or Morse code. He could predict the sex of unborn babies and the winners of World Series, presidential elections, and seven consecutive Kentucky Derbies. He passed every test devised to debunk his celebrity.

Van Arsdale had Jim examined by University of Missouri veterinarians, who said he was normal, though his brow span was wider than usual. People also spoke of his large, piercing, almost human-like eyes.

Now if ever a dog merited a memorial, it was Jim. Dedicated in 1999, "The park, with its manicured plantings and shrubs, is a Zen respite surrounded by old brick buildings typical of Midwestern town centers. A brick walkway takes Jim pilgrims past a gazebo and over a trickling brook, and plaque stations describe Jim's amazing life. At the center is a statue of Jim" (from the book, *Roadside America*).

The park, on South Lafayette Street, was the result of fundraising by the Friends of Saline County. President Connie Reagles says, "It's a very pleasant place to visit. It's actually put Marshall back on the map."

She sells Jim the Wonder Dog mugs, tote bags, videos, t-shirts and more at her shop, Court Street Classics on South Lafayette Street on Marshall's main square. The square is like a trip through time with shops, cafés and law firms lining all four streets around a beautifully preserved 19th-century courthouse.



Boardwalk, Arrow Rock

Be sure to visit the Saline County Historical Society to view the Bryant Collection, an awesome display of 160-year-old taxidermic animals and birds preserved in naturalistic settings behind glass.

From Marshall, Route 41 east is a relaxing drive through picturesque farmland. Just where the road starts to jog south is Arrow Rock, one of the few towns in the United States that in its entirety is a National Historic Landmark. Once a busy river port and Santa Fe Trail stopover with 1,000 residents, today Arrow Rock is home to less than 100. But its beautifully preserved, early 19th-century buildings, bed-and-breakfasts, antique shops and historic theatre attract thousands of travelers annually.



Isle of Capri Casino, Boonville



Lyceum Theatre, Arrow Rock

“What saved the buildings is what killed Arrow Rock,” says Michael Dickey, site administrator at the Arrow Rock State Historic Site. “The railroad replaced river commerce, major roads bypassed the town and the Missouri River migrated a mile away. Arrow Rock became isolated.”

An ambitious restoration effort beginning in the early 1950s saved many historic structures, including the home of artist George Caleb Bingham, the 1834 J. Huston Tavern (still in business) and the charming shops along the canopied boardwalk. A major attraction is the Lyceum Theatre, Missouri’s oldest professional regional theatre, on High Street. The former church is now a 420-seat complex where professional actors from around the country perform a season of shows, June through October.

The Department of Natural Resources manages the 167-acre Arrow Rock State Historic Site, built in 1992 for \$1.2 million. It offers fascinating exhibits about the historic and economic significance of the Booneslick region, including a 20-minute film and a gigantic, detailed map of the Santa Fe Trail. Camping is available at the site.

Continuing on Route 41 south, a 3-mile turnoff on Route K leads to the tiny town of Blackwater. Its Wild West past is evident along Main Street, though antique shops and a café have replaced the saloons and blacksmiths. Park in the middle of the street and shop away an hour or two.

Route 41 continues south to Lamine, then parallels Interstate 70 to Boonville. This riverfront town has more than 400 buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, from Main Street storefronts to restored bluff-top mansions to the classical 1857 Thespian Hall, the oldest theatre west of the Allegheny Mountains.

Boonville also happens to be the gateway community of the Missouri River Heritage Corridor, a regional economic-development program managed by the Missouri River Heritage Community Foundation, and funded by a grant from the Missouri Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The 217-river-mile corridor between Lexington and Hermann includes 16 counties and 192 communities.

Economic development recently got a different kind of boost in Boonville with the December opening of the Isle of Capri Casino. Spokesperson Tracy Stiles says nearly 8,200 people attended opening day, many of whom had patiently waited eight years from the town’s approving riverboat gambling to their chance to actually try it. The tropical-themed casino features a cascading indoor waterfall, undoubtedly flowing with real Missouri River water. Step outside and admire this mighty river while you recall the highlights and surprises of your journey through north central Missouri.

Until next time, may your destinations be exciting and the journeys to them eye-opening. ■